Garrison in Midstream

It is general journalistic practice to avoid statements of opinion regarding criminal trials in progress—both as a matter of courtesy and from a natural disinclination to stick the editorial neck out unnecessarily. The prudent thing is to await the jury's verdict, and to comment on that.

But there are exceptions. Such as the Clay Shaw trial, now plodding its tawdry way through a courtroom in New Orleans.

Before the trial started, District Attorney Jim Garrison protested — with considerable validity — that the press was doing him wrong. He was, he said, being pictured as an unprincipled, overly ambitious D. A., trying to parlay a nonexistent case into a political future. Wait until the case comes to trial, he pleaded, and I will prove the conspiracy theory with evidence I am prevented by law from disclosing now — evidence that will be backed up by surprise witnesses.

Now Garrison is having his day in court. His key witness, Perry Raymond Russo, has repeated the story — with a few contradictions — he told two years ago in the preliminary hearing. Garrison has produced a corroborating witness, Vernon William Bundy, Jr. And true to Garrison's word, there was a surprise witness, Charles Spiesel, who also testified that the defendant, Clay L. Shaw, had conspired with the late Lee Harvey Oswald and the late David Ferrie to kill the President.

Russo has testified to being under psychiatric care. His first accounts of the conspiracy were told after sessions in which he was hypnotized and given Sodium Pentothal. Bundy has, by his own account, been a heroin addict since the age of 13. Spiesel, under cross examination, revealed that he has filed two suits, charging a policeman and a psychiatrist with persecuting him through hypnosis. People have been hypnotizing him and conspiring against him off and on for years, he said.

It is still possible that Garrison may have something up his sleeve — some testimony from some semi-reliable source that will indeed provide substance to his charges against Shaw, the Warren Commission and the federal government. If so, it is hard to understand why he has kept it hidden so long and has chosen to undermine and discredit his case by leading off with the likes of Russo, Bundy and Spiesel.

The only surprise Garrison has produced so far is amazement that the district attorney of New Orleans would place any credence in the testimony of such shattered, disoriented and pathetic humans as these — or that he could expect anyone else to do so.